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CULTURE REVIEW

Localising Extinction

The Devil is in the Detail: Trying to Think Local on Extinction

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It's dawn. The first rays of sun are catching the slender leaves of a peppermint gum forest, tinging their undersides yellow-gold. Lower down the early morning mist threads through the stands of their trunks, softening the forest floor.

Where are you? In a bush paradise it seems. For now there are no people about but this place where you have camped overnight is a soundscape of screeching, crying and trilling birds. But it's when you notice the small bear-like animal waddling its way deeper into the forest that the extent of your distance from a taken-for-granted way of life hits home.

That little bear-like animal known as the Tasmanian Devil forms part of a population of just over a hundred animals on Maria Island located off Tasmania's east coast. The Island is not the Devil's natural habitat. These animals are the progeny of a translocation project established in 2012 as the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment put it, 'to provide insurance against the threat of extinction of the species due to a fatal disease known as Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD)'. Since 2012, disease-free Devils have also been translocated to two other sites in Tasmania at Stony Head, and Wukalina/Mt William National Park. In addition to these efforts, captive breeding and genetic programs now are underway on the Australian mainland and at zoos and research institutions in New Zealand, Europe and the United States. From the peace and quietude of day-break on Maria Island, the international effort to save the Tasmanian Devil from extinction is a confronting lesson (if we needed one) in the extent to which our human influence over the non-human world prevails.

Species extinction has become a constant in our public discourse. The idea particularly, that the world is entering a 'sixth extinction' event or Holocene extinction, and that unlike

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previous extinctions this one is associated with human activities is established scientific fact. In particular, human-induced global warming and climate disruption and the many associated processes—ocean acidification, rising sea levels, glacial and permafrost thawing—are widely understood to be accelerating this extinction event. However, understanding of the way in which all this shapes both the fate of the little Devil as well as conservation efforts to save this species is complicated at every turn by an array of competing human interests and desires. A settler colonial political economy and the psychoanalytics of reactions to extinction and climate change cross-cut conservation practices and an environmental ethic on the body of this small native animal.

The colonization of Tasmania rapidly set in train what scientists refer to as the ‘evil quartet of extinction’—the introduction of invasive species, overharvesting, habitat destruction and fragmentation. The little Devil itself was regarded by colonists and later farmers across the State as a vicious predator and a threat to their livestock and agricultural production. From 1830-1941 colonial and later successive state governments legislated a bounty on the Devil. The animal was clubbed, shot, poisoned, and trapped to death for financial reward. Only in 1999 did the species (and other endangered native species) receive legal protection under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* however, it is known that illegal killing continues today albeit ‘locally intense’. And while this killing is regarded by scientists as insignificant in terms of overall population numbers the human threat to Devils remains highly significant but in many ways only tangentially discussed.

The greatest threat to the survival of the species however, and that which receives almost all the media and research attention is that of the fatal DFTD—an horrific facial cancer. Here after all, is what appears to be a non-human agent driving extinction while dedicated humans—scientists, conservationists, volunteers, fund raisers and the state government—are the agents driving the effort to prevent extinction. And yet, habitat destruction and fragmentation; the agricultural and forestry sectors use of pesticides and herbicides all continue apace. And almost all of us drive cars in Tasmania.

Habitat destruction and fragmentation has been the crucible around which numerous environmental struggles have taken place in Tasmania the longest-running being the so-called, forestry wars. And yet, the destruction of the Devil’s habitat for farming and forestry and the fragmentation of vital wildlife corridors by these sectors hardly rates a mention in *Save the Tasmanian Devil* publicity and fund raising. And why is there almost no discussion of these sectors’ widespread use of poison? It is now 55 years since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* demonstrated that chemical pesticides and herbicides were not just poisoning their intended insect or weed targets but accumulating in living cells, where they altered essential cell machinery, interacted in unpredictable ways, and mutated genes in a cascade of damage that warps the entire ‘web of life’.

While there is clearly money to be made in the industrialised exploitation and destruction of wildlife habitat by agriculture and forestry there is also serious money to be made exploiting the efforts of dedicated conservationists and others involved in the effort to save the Devil from extinction. The tourism industry is openly concerned about the possible extinction of the Devil. It is on the record as saying that ‘the possible extinction of the Tasmanian Devil would constitute a really significant blow to Australian and Tasmanian tourism’.

Of course, it is easy outrage that is expressed against the inter-linking of powerful economic and political interests—historic and current—but we all share responsibility for the future of the future of the Devil. Since the use of cars and trucks became widespread in Tasmania in the

1950s our vehicles have become monstrous machines of extinction. Last year 293,000 animals were killed on Tasmanian roads. Of this number 3,392 were Tasmanian Devils.

Global warming and climate change/disruption have hardly figured in my account of any of the factors above that threaten the extinction of the Devil. But of course, climate change adds another layer of cross-cutting complexity to the fate of all species as it threatens the health of entire ecosystems. And of all the factors driving the extinction of species it is climate change that generates often primal emotional reactions. Far less rational than self-interest (economic or political), buried deep in our collective sub-conscious must lurk the death-drive: a desire to continue living our destructive lives without regard for the fatal consequences. Clearly, not everyone shares in this collective psychic life. Amongst all those working tirelessly to save the Tasmanian Devil an ethic of hope deeply grounded in actions of care for those little animals and their environment has only recently demonstrated that the risk of extinction from DFTD can be prevented. Surely, it must be up to the rest of us now to act against those other equally preventable factors?